

THE COMEBACK FORMULA™

A RESILIENCE-BUILDING GUIDEBOOK

*Five powerful, commonsense practices
that transform disaster into opportunity*



BY SANDRA YOUNGER

AUTHOR OF THE FIRE OUTSIDE MY WINDOW

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The Comeback Formula: A Resilience-Building Guidebook

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Sandra Younger is an international speaker, best-selling author and popular media guest whose inspiring wildfire-survival story and proven resilience-building practices equip disaster survivors, emergency professionals, and other mission-driven leaders to transform disaster into opportunity and loss into legacy.*

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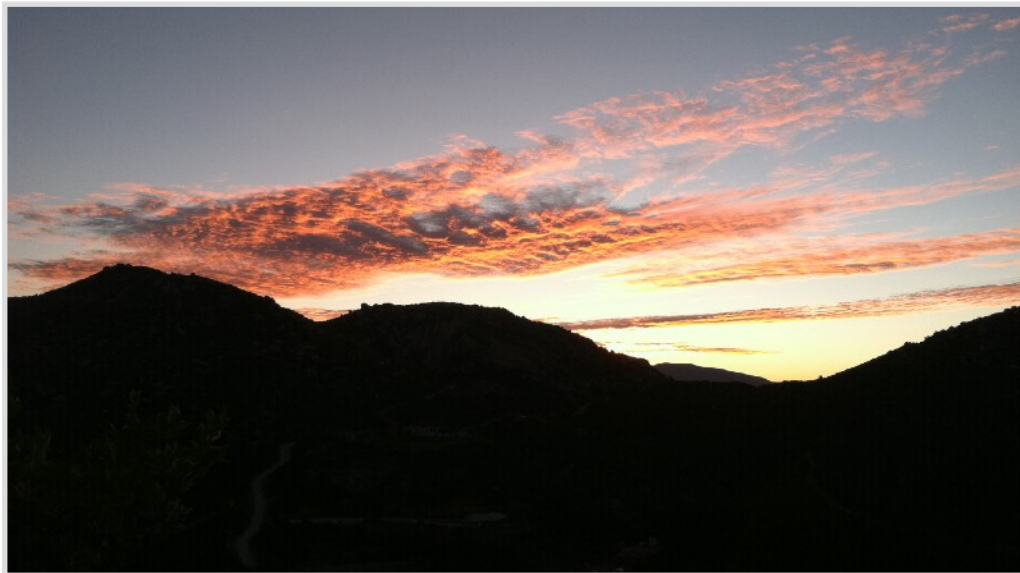
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Cover photo by R.E. Younger



My Story: How I Discovered The ComeBACK Formula™

On October 26, 2003, my husband, Bob, and I woke up in the middle of the night to the sight of fire outside our windows. We had time only to grab our pets and a few photos before jumping into the closest car and running for our lives.

In a desperate effort to escape, we drove straight through the firestorm, miraculously making our way through thick smoke, swirling embers and sheeting flames. Across Southern California that terrible week, 25 people—including 12 of our neighbors—died in a series of catastrophic wildfires. And over 3,700 homes burned. Ours was among them. But we had survived!

By the next day, the media and everyone else were calling us “fire victims.” That didn’t make sense. We were alive! My husband and I, two big shaggy dogs, and our pet cockatiel had driven through fire and emerged physically unscathed!

How could we be victims? As a friend put it, “We buried the victims. The rest of us are survivors.”

But not everyone affected by the fire felt that way. Some people seemed to embrace the “victim” label. They even introduced themselves as “fire victims.”

*How could I be
a victim? I was alive!
Unlike 12 of my
neighbors.*

Many of us were angry at first. But this vocal minority of people were bitter and eager to blame someone for their pain. And the fascinating thing was: It didn’t seem to matter how much or how little they’d lost.

While researching my book, *The Fire Outside My Window*, I interviewed more than 100 people, including two families who had each lost *three* loved ones. And yet they weren’t the bitter ones!

The most bitter people I met had lost an office or a garage. Their families, their animals and their homes were all safe.

And that's when I realized: It's a choice!

*We don't always get to choose what happens to us. But we **can** choose our response. We can be victims. Or we can be survivors.*

No matter how terrible our circumstances, we get to choose.

Of course, I wasn't the first to learn this lesson. Here's how psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl expressed it in his wonderful book, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

“Everything can be taken from a man [or a woman] but one thing, the last of the human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

Obviously, my experience can't compare to Viktor Frankl's. But still, I related so deeply with Frankl's thoughts that I began to wonder if the steps in coming back from adversity might be the same no matter what the loss.

So I did some research and discovered it's true! In fact, academics and psychologists have extensively studied this topic of how people come back from adversity. They call it **RESILIENCE**.

There's even a subset in the resilience literature that documents a phenomenon known as **post-traumatic growth**—meaning that some people use a challenge as fuel to achieve tremendous accomplishments.

Think of Nobel Peace Prize winners Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai, and Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, only three among many who have overcome significant adversity and transformed loss into legacy.

Now here's the really fascinating part: **Resilience isn't only an innate strength; it's also a skill that can be learned!**



Resilience research proves there are simple steps almost anyone can take to help them recover from almost any kind of adversity.

I've read many of the major scientific findings in this area of psychology and boiled them down to what I call **The ComeBACK Formula™ — Five Powerful, Commonsense Practices That Transform Disaster Into Opportunity.**

The ComeBACK Formula™

A Resilience-Building System

Five Powerful, Commonsense Practices That Transform Disaster Into Opportunity

1. **Come to a place of gratitude.**
2. **Be patient** with the pain. **Believe** you can come back.
3. **Accept** help. **Ask** when you need it.
4. **Choose** your story. Victim or victor?
5. **Keep moving forward.** Detach from the past; embrace the possibilities of a new future.

This is for you if . . .

- *You're a survivor who's experienced loss and/or trauma.*
- *You're an emergency professional responsible for helping your community prepare, respond and recover from disasters and other traumatic incidents.*
- *You're a nonprofit leader or volunteer who works in crisis situations.*
- *You're a mission-centered businessperson serving others faced with challenges you've already overcome.*



What Is Resilience?

“Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means ‘bouncing back’ from difficult experiences.

“Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary. People commonly demonstrate resilience.

“Being resilient does not mean that a person doesn’t experience difficulty or distress. Emotional pain and sadness are common in people who have suffered major adversity or trauma in their lives.

In fact, the road to resilience is likely to involve considerable emotional distress.

“Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed in anyone.”

[American Psychological Association](#)

The comeback journey is personal and individual. Each person responds to adversity differently. Recovery takes time and effort, courage and patience.

But whatever your circumstances, know that you are resilient. Resilience is in your DNA.

And whatever resilience principles you don’t already know and practice intuitively, you can learn.

I hope this guidebook gives you an overview of the journey ahead, a place to start, a few signposts to keep you on course, and most of all, the confidence that you can and will come back—stronger and wiser than before.

Sandra



Information in this guidebook should not be used as a substitute for professional health and mental health care.

Individuals who believe they may need or benefit from professional care should see a licensed health/mental health provider.

DISCLAIMER

1. Come to a place of gratitude



“He is a man of sense who does not grieve for what he has not, but rejoices in what he has.” Epictetus, 1st-century philosopher

“I have found my greatest defense from bitterness is the simple act of quieting the noise of my mind and taking a moment to be intentionally thankful, to be grateful for something, anything. For me, gratitude is a masterful ally against the cunning adversary of anxiety.” Erik Wahl, artist, speaker, author

“We lived each of those chaotic early post-fire days acutely aware and grateful for the simple gift of life itself. If you had seen us that night in my little white sports coupe, inching through a nightscape opaque with smoke and possessed by flames, if you had pulled back into the helicopter shot until the Acura became a tiny white pinball careening through a red and orange maze of fire, you would have thought, and rightly so: they’ll never make it; there’s no way they’ll ever find their way out of that.

“And yet we did ... We were alive. Somehow, for some reason, Bob and I, [our Newfoundland dogs] Terra and Charter, and even Chelsea the brainless cockatiel came through the flames untouched. Compared to that, nothing else mattered. Nothing.”

From “The Kindness of Strangers,” Chapter 23 in The Fire Outside My Window

What you'll learn

In this step of The ComeBACK Formula™, you'll learn how powerful gratitude is in neutralizing negative emotions, boosting resilience, and increasing feelings of peace and satisfaction. You'll also learn ways to build your gratitude muscle and incorporate thankfulness into your everyday life.

Mom was right . . .

. . . with her constant reminders to “say thank you.” In fact, she was probably wiser than she knew. Reams of research have now proven that developing the habit of gratitude isn't just good manners, it's good for us!

Psychologist Robert A. Emmons of the University of California, Davis, who's devoted his research career to exploring the effects of being thankful, puts it this way: “The evidence that cultivating gratitude is good for you is overwhelming.

“Specifically, we have shown that gratitude is positively related to . . . life satisfaction, vitality, happiness, self-esteem, optimism, hope, empathy and willingness to provide emotional and tangible support for other people, whereas being ungrateful is related to anxiety, depression, envy, materialism and loneliness.”

For those of us whose lives have been splintered by tragedy or disaster, it's natural to grieve our losses, to be angry or resentful. On our journey to acceptance, we may experience all the well-known phases of grief—also including denial, anger, bargaining and depression.



But here's where gratitude can do some of its best work. ***Finding even one reason to feel thankful despite a world of hurt can be a positive first step in rising from the quicksand that threatens to keep us trapped in pain and bitterness.*** It's the first step in healing, growth and recovery. It's the first step in embracing a new future that often holds new opportunities.

We know that gratitude naturally comes easier for some people than others, but as with all the other steps of resilience, it's possible to grow your gratitude muscle! Even if it feels forced at first, practicing gratitude can make us more grateful—which leads to greater happiness.



Try it now . . .

Write down three to five things you're grateful for in this moment. You can start with big stuff, like "I'm alive!" Or you can focus on everyday pleasures we sometimes overlook, like a sunny day or a welcome rainstorm.

*If your list is heavy on concepts like "family," "health," or "job," try creating a deeper sense of thankfulness by asking yourself **why** you feel grateful for each one.*

Science says . . .

The research is clear and abundant: Gratitude is a valuable practice that helps us boost resilience and recover from loss and trauma.

"Gratitude helps people cope with stress and trauma

"Indeed, traumatic memories are less likely to surface—and are less intense when they do—in those who are regularly grateful.

"Interestingly, people instinctively express gratitude when confronted with adversity."

Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky, University of California, Riverside, The How of Happiness

Keep the momentum going: Ideas to incorporate gratitude in your everyday life

- **Count your blessings.** Use the list you just made to begin a gratitude journal. Make a daily or weekly note of three to five things you're grateful for. Think about: What's working in my life? What's something good that happened today? Who really helped me out? Gratitude guru Robert Emmons says "becoming aware of one's blessings actually leads to having more to be grateful for."
- **Say thank you.** Write thank you notes or emails. Thank a random stranger—a janitor, a clerk, a waitress, your doctor, a co-worker—for what they do. Emmons comments: "Expressing gratitude toward someone whom you've never properly taken the time to thank can have profoundly positive consequences for both the person expressing and the recipient."
- **Appreciate the ordinary.** Start to notice and be thankful for everyday things you normally take for granted. Like a hot shower, a vacuum cleaner, your car, a bird singing outside your window. As writer Ralph Marston reminds us: "The more gratitude you feel, the more positive and effective you'll be in everything you do."

2. Be patient. Believe you can come back



“Bob and I never wondered whether or not to rebuild our home. From that first day after the fire, when Bob and [our contractor] shook hands amid the ashes, we started the long process of recreating our oasis in the chaparral.

“Building a house is a massive project, and it seemed to take forever. In the meantime, we were stuck in the suburbs again, living in a house owned by someone else, surrounded by someone else’s furniture, often wearing someone else’s clothes, and yearning all the time simply to go home.

“It took nearly two years before Terra Nova once again stood complete, looking as if it had grown in place, its stucco echoing the color of canyon earth, its windows repeating the sage green of returning chaparral, its tile roof blending the slate and silver of surrounding boulders.

“Long before that we’d begun planning a grand welcome home party. (Not a housewarming party, we were careful to point out; we’d done that already.)

“And when our guests arrived to celebrate that impending milestone, no one minded the unfinished details, the unpaved driveway or unplanted landscaping. No one complained about the stacks of leftover lumber in the yard, the rented folding chairs and tables in lieu of real furniture.

“Terra Nova rocked that day with joy and laughter, with the love and good wishes of more than a hundred family and friends who braved the twists and turns of Wildcat Canyon Road to share our celebration.”

*From “A New Season,” Chapter 26 of
The Fire Outside My Window*

It's not linear . . .

Coming back from crisis and disaster isn't a straightforward process. So even though I've numbered the five resilience-building practices summarized in The ComeBACK Formula™, they aren't necessarily sequential steps.

In the initial grip of grief, for instance, especially when a loved one dies unexpectedly, the pain may be too deep to start with gratitude. Feel free to rearrange the sequence of ideas presented here to suit your own needs at any given time.



***“Human beings have enormous resilience.”
Muhammed Yunus, economist, Nobel Prize winner***

***“My scars remind me that I did indeed survive my deepest wounds. The damage life has inflicted has left me stronger and more resilient.”
Steve Goodier, Methodist minister, author***

What you'll learn

In this step of The ComeBACK Formula™, you'll learn why patience, perseverance and confidence are keys to coming back from disaster and loss. You'll also learn what to expect in the immediate aftermath of trauma and how to develop the grit and optimism that will keep you from giving up as you navigate your ComeBACK journey.

Loss, disaster and suffering set us back . . .

. . . erasing our progress and dumping daunting obstacles in our path. It's not unusual in the immediate aftermath of disaster to wonder how we'll ever regain what we've lost, to doubt our ability to come back. Regaining normal lives may even look impossible.

Here's the truth. The road to recovery is long and rocky. It's going to be hard; our lives will never be the same. And it's going to take a while; nobody bounces back overnight.

Here's the rest of the truth. You **can** come back. You have what it takes. You are a resilient being, part of a resilient universe. Resilience is in your DNA. And you can build it like a muscle.

You know people who have come back from terrible adversity. And you yourself have already overcome countless challenges. You can do this.

Some people seem to come back more easily than others, and for a number of reasons. Some people have more resources; some have more support from family, friends and employers. And some people are more naturally optimistic and determined than others. It's an individual journey.

So it's important not to compare or contrast your progress. Even if you're among those who recover fastest, you're going to need a big, fat helping of patience—patience with the process, patience with the pain, patience with others, and patience with yourself.

Patience is a major step in the ComeBACK journey. So is believing in your innate powers of resilience **and** your ability to learn new resilience-boosting attitudes and skills. Think about how far you've already come in life. You can come back again!

Forewarned is forearmed. We found it helpful to know what symptoms people often encounter on the ComeBACK journey. Here's a summary:

- Anxiety, anger, sadness, irritability and overwhelm are normal reactions as you grieve your losses and adjust to a new reality with new responsibilities. Don't try to fight or repress this natural process; you'll only prolong the pain and delay healing. Instead, let the waves of emotion come and go. This is how we process grief.
- Don't be surprised if immediately after a traumatic event, you feel confused or disoriented. Your mind may also keep flashing back to vivid memories of the crisis.



- You may notice physical symptoms—headaches, aches and pains, nausea, sweating, rapid heartbeat, insomnia or oversleeping. You may have upsetting dreams. You may lose your appetite or eat more than usual. These are all common symptoms following trauma. ***If they persist or become acute, please see a doctor.***
- You may be unusually upset or startled by sights, sounds, smells or other sensations that trigger memories of your traumatic experience.
- You may feel irritable or want more alone time than usual. Be aware that others around you are feeling the tension, too; everyone's likely to be more sensitive than usual.



Science says . . .

In a classic study, Stanford psychologist and researcher Catharine Cox studied 301 historical figures to find the secret of their success and discovered “high but not the highest intelligence, combined with the greatest degree of persistence, will achieve greater eminence than the highest degree of intelligence with somewhat less persistence.”

Try it now . . .

Think and/or write about a few times you persevered through a tough situation and came out on top.

Include something you chose—school, training, a sports event, working hard toward a goal—as well as something you didn’t choose—a breakup, an illness, a job loss or financial setback, loss of a home, or death of a loved one.

Were there times you wondered if you’d make it? What did you learn about life and yourself from sticking it through? What lesson would you pass along to others?

Keep the momentum going: Ideas to incorporate patience, perseverance and confidence into your everyday life

- **Chill out.** Take care of yourself. Self-care is critical after a setback. Prioritize sleep, exercise and good nutrition. Make time for favorite people, pets and activities. Put yourself in situations where you feel loved, confident and powerful. Take a break to watch funny videos or movies! (POWs have used humor to endure captivity.)
- **Tell your story.** Sharing your experience and how it’s made you feel enables you to revisit the situation in a way that gives you more control than you may have had at the time. Talk with trusted family and friends and/or a mental health professional and/or keep a journal. Or express your feelings through art or music.
- **Be inspired.** Think about people you admire who have overcome tremendous adversity. Tell yourself: If they could do that, I can do this. Read biographies and/or watch movies about heroic people who overcame tough odds.

3. Accept help. Be tough enough to ask when you need it



“But then it occurred to him that any progress he had made on his quest so far he had made by accepting the help that had been offered to him.”

Neil Gaiman, author

“Until we can receive with an open heart, we’re never really giving with an open heart. When we attach judgment to receiving help, we knowingly or unknowingly attach judgment to giving help.”

Brené Brown, author

*A*fter the Cedar Fire, Bob and I often found ourselves in tears, but never because of what we’d lost. What moved us the most was the care and generosity, proven over and over through countless surprises, of those who rallied to our aid—family, friends and a multitude of strangers.

“It did feel strange suddenly being an object of charity. For years I’d written checks to charities, sponsored impoverished kids in Africa, and schlepped boxes of outgrown clothes and toys to Goodwill. I thought of myself as a giver, not a beggar.

“But now, bereft of everything we’d owned except a Nikon and a laundry basket of photos, it was hard to deny that we were the ones in need. I found it an awkward and embarrassing adjustment until a psychologist friend gave me the perspective I lacked. ‘Sandra,’ she said. ‘Right now your job is to be a grateful recipient.’”

*From “The Kindness of Strangers,” Chapter 23 in
The Fire Outside My Window*

What you'll learn

In this step of The ComeBACK Formula™, you'll learn why it's not only wise but essential to accept and ask for the help and support of others—family, friends, professionals and higher powers—to successfully recover from disaster and loss.

Imagine a bee hive with only one bee . . .

. . . or an anthill populated by a single, lonely ant. Imagine a flockless bird, a herdless caribou, a packless wolf. None of them would likely last very long.

We humans are the same. We, too, are social creatures who live in families and societal groups and depend on each other. Relying on others isn't weak; it's playing to our strengths. No wonder connection and community are key to boosting resilience.

And yet it's sometimes so hard to accept help when we need it—harder still to ask for it. Why? Because it can feel awkward, embarrassing even. Most of us like to think of ourselves as strong and self-sufficient. We don't want to be anyone's "charity case."

Men typically have a harder time asking for help than women, and those with "tough" jobs—military, firefighters, law enforcement, for instance—often have the hardest time. It's not macho to accept help, much less ask for it. Or is it?

I challenge you to find a truly successful individual in all of human history who has made it all alone without help. In fact, the heroes we most admire have learned to rely on the support of others as a key tool in achieving their goals.

We even see this fundamental success principle played out in our favorite stories. Consider Joseph Campbell's iconic *Hero's Journey*, an archetypal tale we all know because it's the underlying plot in so many books and movies.

Every future hero encounters not only a fearsome challenge, but also some sort of mentor or guide who shows up along the way. Luke Skywalker had Obi-Wan Kenobi. Cinderella had a Fairy Godmother. Harry Potter had Dumbledore. Etc.

So what's weak about asking for help when we need it? Nothing. In fact, that's exactly what smart, successful achievers do. It's a critical piece of the resilience puzzle, an essential step in coming back stronger than before.

The takeaway? Accept the help family, friends and even total strangers offer. Don't hesitate to seek professional counsel any time you're in crisis. And pray, even if you're not sure anyone's listening. Ask for guidance; ask for whatever you need; ask for outright miracles. You may be surprised by what happens.



Try it now . . .

Make a list of your top accomplishments in life so far—what you're most proud of.

Now write down the people or groups who helped you achieve those goals and why their support was important to your success. See? You've already proven the advantages of accepting help.

Science says . . .

“Social support is exceptionally important for maintaining good physical and mental health. Overall, it appears that positive social support of high quality can enhance resilience to stress, help protect against developing trauma-related psycho-pathology, decrease the functional consequences of trauma-induced disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and reduce medical morbidity and mortality.”

The psychobiology of depression and resilience to stress: implications for prevention and treatment.
Southwick SM, Vythilingam M, Charney DS. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*. April 2005.

Keep the momentum going: Ideas to incorporate the practice of relying on community and enlisting help into your everyday attitudes and emotions

- **Hang out with friends and family.** Connection is key to resilience. Take advantage of opportunities to be with *positive, supportive* individuals and groups.
- **Take names.** Add the names of those whose help you appreciate to your gratitude journal. Each day or just once a week, ask yourself, who am I grateful for right now? It doesn't have to be a doctor who saved your life. It can be a random stranger who encouraged you or went out of their way to help you out.
- **Help someone else feel good.** Notice how good it feels each time you help someone else. This is the satisfaction you can give others—even *when you have nothing else to give*—by allowing them to support you when you need it.
- **Do a little research.** Brainstorm where you might find the help and support you'll need during your comeback journey. Think now beyond family and friends. A few suggestions to get you started: books, websites, videos, online forums, self-help and support groups, clergy and mental health professionals.

4. Choose your story: Victim or survivor? (And eventually victor)



“As Bob and I saw it, one word summarized our attitude [after the fire]: ‘survivor.’ Accepting the victim label seemed tantamount to conceding that the fire had conquered us. But we were not defeated. Rather, we felt motivated; we felt resolute. By the grace of God, we had escaped the flames, and in the same way we would meet the challenges of rebuilding our home and our lives.

“The fire did force me to make a choice, and I did it consciously. I thought of it in an allegorical sense. It seemed as if I’d been walking along through life when suddenly I came upon a bridge. I could see across to the other side, a lush landscape beckoning with unimaginable potential. So I set off to explore it, but an ogre popped up and demanded that I pay a toll to cross.

“‘What’s the toll?’ I asked.

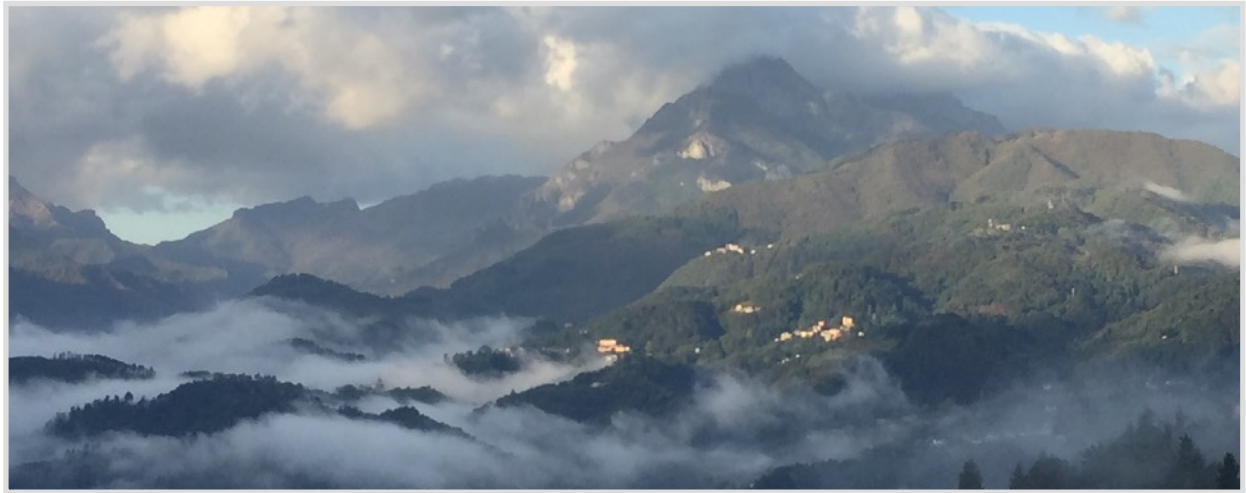
“‘Everything you own.’

“Who wouldn’t step back at that? Who would choose to pay such a price, no matter how enticing the possibilities that lay beyond? But what if the awful decision had been made for you? What if the toll had already been paid?

“That’s exactly how it seemed to me. The fire had taken so much and without my consent.

“But now I could choose—whether to remain ‘that lady who lost her house in the fire,’ lamenting all I’d lost, or cross the bridge and trust that fortune would somehow spring from misfortune.”

From “We Buried the Victims,” Chapter 24 of The Fire Outside My Window



“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist, author, Holocaust survivor

“I have no choice about whether or not I have Parkinson’s. I have nothing but choices about how I react to it. In those choices, there’s freedom to do things in areas I wouldn’t have otherwise found myself in.”

Michael J. Fox, actor, advocate, author

What you’ll learn

In this step of The ComeBACK Formula™, you’ll learn that no matter what your circumstances, you can choose your response. You’ll also learn to distinguish between a victim mindset and a growth mindset, and why the way you think of yourself in the aftermath of loss and disaster determines the success of your comeback journey.

Disasters come in all flavors

Some disasters people bring upon themselves. Putting themselves into dangerous situations. Making reckless decisions. But many of life’s hardships barge into our lives uninvited. One minute we’re living our normal lives; the next, everything has changed.

We don’t always get to choose what happens to us. But here’s a revolutionary lesson I took from my own fire experience: We can choose our response! We can choose the story we want to live into!

I saw some fire survivors choose to self-identify as victims. And I saw some of those same people even years later still bogged down in anger, resentment and bitterness. Their victim mentality had become a permanent way of life. What they told themselves to expect—a victim’s tragic, limited existence—became their experience.

Expectations are powerful! I see proof of this even in my dogs. Get out the peanut butter jar, and they'll assume a perfect sit in front of me, eyes intent, ears perked. This hopeful response comes from their positive past experience with peanut butter jars.

But when I get out the brushes and toenail clippers, not-so-happy thoughts pop into their heads, and they slink away to another room. From happy to fearful, just like that!

We humans are the same. ***Whatever comes up in our lives, we associate with past experiences, which leads us to think history is about to repeat itself—for good or ill.*** Through force of habit, we develop deep ruts in our thinking that tend to govern our decisions and responses to new situations.

Some of us are unfortunately conditioned early in life to expect the worst. I was one of these people. Thank goodness, I've since learned that most of our worst fears never materialize. Even better, I now know it's possible to exercise optimism like a muscle, giving us control over negative thoughts and emotions, which in turn shifts our behavior, which in turn determines our future.

We can be victims if we choose. Or we can be survivors—and even victors!

As Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck has found, people who believe they can develop talents—an attitude she calls a “growth mindset”—achieve more than those who believe their talents are set from birth—an attitude she's labeled a “fixed mindset.”



Few experiences in my life have given me more opportunity to practice this new way of living than coming back from the Cedar Fire.

But now I can say from personal experience that Viktor Frankl was right. It ***is*** possible to choose our attitude in any given circumstance, to live into a new story of our choice.

As my fellow resilience expert Ken Druck teaches, it may take a long time after a deep loss to realize that the possibility of choice even exists, but eventually the light creeps in, and we can begin to feel hope and optimism again.

Eventually, we rediscover the last of the human freedoms: the power to choose our own way forward.



Science says . . .

“Neurons that fire together, wire together.’ It’s a classic saying, and it’s widely accepted because it’s very true. The longer the neurons [brain cells] fire, the more of them that fire, and the more intensely they fire, the more they’re going to wire that inner strength — that happiness, gratitude, feeling confident, feeling successful, feeling loved and lovable.”

Rick Hanson, neuropsychologist, author of *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science Of Contentment, Calm and Confidence*, in *The Huffington Post*

Try it now . . .

Write down the negative self-talk bouncing around inside your brain. (We’ve all got it.)

Now go through each “but what if” and “I’ll never” and imagine that you’re a debater taking the opposite perspective.

What better outcome can you think of? Here’s a prompt to start your creative juices flowing:

“I wonder if it’s possible that”

Notice if you feel your emotions shift at all as you make room for positive possibilities.

Keep the momentum going: Ideas to incorporate conscious choice into your everyday attitudes and emotions

- **Set a positive intention and stick to it.** Write down and/or say aloud: “I’m a survivor; I’m a thriver; I’m a victor!” Even if it feels a little silly, come back to that declaration when negative thoughts intrude. Eventually, your brain will take the hint.
- **Be here now.** One of the most effective tools to help us gain more control over our thoughts is mindfulness. No voodoo here. Mindfulness is simply being aware of what’s going on right here, right now—which is usually a lot better than what’s going on in our heads. Conscious breathing, meditation, yoga and time in nature all have been scientifically proven to boost well-being and happiness.
- **Ask a question.** Whenever I get bogged down in negativity, I ask myself this one question I learned from author Eckhart Tolle: “What is lacking in this moment?” When I can set aside past regrets and future worries for a moment, I usually realize, even when I don’t have what I want, I actually have everything I really need.

5. Keep moving forward



“It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.”

**Joseph Campbell,
mythologist, author**

“I have always believed that whatever good or bad fortune may come our way, we can always give it meaning and transform it into something of value.”

Herman Hesse, author

“Despite how we saw ourselves [as survivors] almost everyone else saw us as victims. People changed when they found out we’d lost our house in the fire. Their faces fell slack; their voices thickened in sympathy. ‘Oh my god,’ they’d say. ‘I’m so sorry.’

“No one meant to offend us. People were genuinely stunned and concerned. For most, just thinking about losing their home and everything they owned was jarring, unimaginable. They had no idea how to respond, no way of understanding that Bob and I couldn’t afford to dwell on our loss; we had to focus on the future.

“Gradually, we realized that survival was only the first step in the long process of healing and re-ordering our world. Eventually we learned that if we paid careful attention, we could find opportunities in the ashes.”

*From “We Buried the Victims,” Chapter 24 in
The Fire Outside My Window*

What you'll learn

In this step of The ComeBACK Formula™, you'll learn why acceptance and transition are necessary parts of coming back from disaster and loss. You'll also learn the importance of forgiveness in letting go and moving forward.

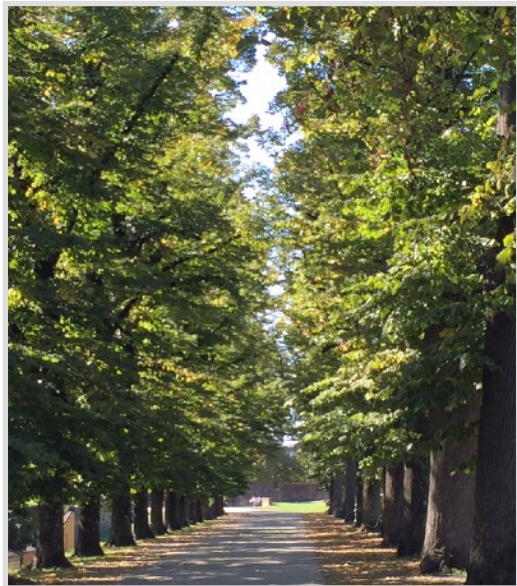
Change is the only constant

We all recognize the truth of this old axiom. But that doesn't make it any easier to accept painful and sometimes sudden changes that alter our way of life. Shock and denial characterize the first part of the grieving process. It's hard for us to believe things have shifted so radically.

And while it is possible to recover and rebuild, the effects of deep loss and devastating disaster can't be erased. Life will never be the same. Hopes and dreams may be shattered. Some goals we once held may not be reachable now.

It's normal to grieve as you come to terms with loss, but it holds us back when we try to hang on to what can never be the same. Your old normal is not coming back, no matter how much you wish it would. Let it go. Know that normality will return, and it will be a new kind of normality—one quite possibly richer in many ways than before.

We've already learned that we can exercise the power of conscious choice to shift our emotions and our behavior from the negativity of a victim mentality to a more positive and happier outlook as survivors, thrivers and eventually victors.



In the same way, we can make a conscious choice to let go of our attachment to the way things used to be and can never be again.

It's a gradual and painful process, but because we are naturally resilient beings, right down to our DNA, it's also a natural progression in our comeback journey.

Those who are most successful in negotiating the comeback journey gradually work through their initial sense of incredulity and denial, and accept that life has changed. That realization then enables them to shift their focus to the opportunities inherent in building a new future.

We will naturally experience sadness and grief for what we've lost. We may also feel anger, blame and resentment toward others who may have caused or contributed to our pain.

All of these feelings are understandable. But dwelling endlessly on past events beyond our control doesn't solve the problem; it only keeps us mired in the pain. The sooner we're able to let go and forgive, the sooner we can continue our comeback journey.

A VERY IMPORTANT NOTE: You may also need to forgive yourself. Perhaps you did play a role in the way the crisis unfolded. Or perhaps you're haunted by thoughts of what you should or could or might have done differently to change the outcome.

Either way, the past is past. But as Shakespeare put it, the past is also prologue. Again, let it go. Forgive others and yourself. And move in the only direction that's open to you now—forward.

Experience has proven again and again that crisis does breed opportunity. **Fortune can spring from misfortune—if you're open to it.**

Science says . . .

"This review suggests that trait mindfulness and acceptance are associated with greater psychological adjustment following exposure to trauma, while experiential avoidance, persistent dissociation, and coping strategies involving emotional disengagement are associated with greater PTSD symptom severity and related psychopathology."

Conceptualizing mindfulness and acceptance as components of psychological resilience to trauma.
Thompson RW, Arnkoff DB, Glass CR. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. October 2011.

Try it now . . .

Imagine going back in time and being a wise friend and mentor to the person you were before crisis intruded your life. Knowing what you know now, what would you tell your former self to help them cope with what's coming? If you can, lay out the good as well as the bad. Try to imagine how you might eventually benefit from the opportunities that lie along this unexpected path.

In my case, for instance, I would tell my pre-fire self: "There's going to be a huge fire. You're going to lose your house. You're even going to have to drive through smoke and flames to escape, and you're going to be terrified. But you'll be OK. And you're going to use this experience to write that book you've always wanted to write. You're going to be wiser and more compassionate, and you're going to be able to help others because of what you'll learn."



Photo by R.E. Younger

Keep the momentum going: Ideas to incorporate healthy detachment and forward-thinking into your everyday life

- **Mental visits.** If you've lost your home, make a list of whatever you miss most and spend a few minutes now and then "visiting" those absent treasures in your thoughts until you feel ready to let go.
- **Capture memories in words.** Favorite photographs that reminded you of a special event may be gone, but writing even a few sentences about that time or a specific photographic image can keep them just as fresh in your memory.
- **Write an honest letter. (But don't mail it.)** What would you like to say to a person who played a role in causing the disaster or loss you've experienced? Vent your anger and frustration and see if you can come a little closer to forgiving that person, if not for their sake, for yours. You may also want to write a similar letter to yourself.
- **Record your progress.** Don't be surprised a few years down the road to realize you've grown and evolved in ways you might never have expected—in spite of and possibly because of the loss or disaster you've experienced. Many survivors develop an increased sense of self-confidence and self-worth, greater empathy and compassion, closer relationships, deeper spirituality and a more intense love of life. Jotting down just a few lines in a journal now and then will make it easy to look back later and see how far you've come.

The road from here



Thank you for investing your time and attention (especially if you're in the early aftermath of crisis when there's so much on your plate) to read this guidebook and try a few of the exercises suggested here.

Now you know what experience and empirical research tell us about how to come back from adversity—and even transform disaster into opportunity. Now you have a toolbox of ideas and practices I hope you'll return to again and again in the days ahead.

The ComeBACK Formula™ takes us through the initial steps of crisis-related emotional recovery. It enables us to transition quickly from victims to survivors! But the journey can continue farther if you choose to pursue it.

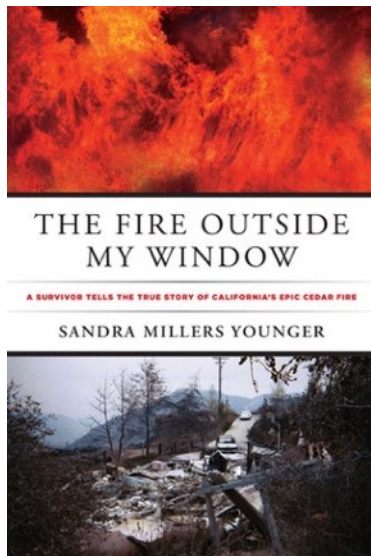
Survivors usually evolve into thrivers. And thrivers often become givers, generously sharing the gifts and wisdom they gained from their own crises with others facing similar challenges. Thriving and giving are wonderful ways to live! No need to travel any farther along the comeback journey. You've lived into your new story!

Unless . . . you're among those who feel called to take yet another step, to leverage their own loss into a legacy, to transform their personal pain into blessings for themselves and others. If this sounds like you, rock on. The world is waiting.

Let's stay in touch. Email me at sandra@sandrayounger.com Visit my website at SandraYounger.com Follow me on Facebook (**Sandra Younger**), Instagram (**smyounger**) and/or Twitter (**@syounger**) Meanwhile, much love and all best wishes to you as your comeback journey continues!

Sandra

Recommended reading



[The Fire Outside My Window: A Survivor Tells the True Story of California's Epic Cedar Fire](#) is both a poignant memoir and a veteran journalist's narrative nonfiction account of one of the biggest and most destructive wildfires in California history, a catastrophic event that crippled postcard-perfect San Diego in October 2003 and proved a harbinger of escalating fire regimes worldwide.

Author [Sandra Millers Younger's](#) miraculous saga of escape, ruin and renewal unifies a tapestry woven from more than 100 interviews with firefighters, survivors and the families of those who died.

The fire itself is the main character in this epic story—a rampaging monster, framed within historical context, battled by understaffed, under-equipped firefighters, and confronted from the rare perspective of terrified civilians caught in its path.

Timing, location and weather conspired against air tankers, fire engines and bulldozers, enabling a lost hunter's signal fire to gather strength in the mountains east of San Diego.

Overnight, a swelling wind sent flames galloping toward the Pacific, killing 15 people, 12 of them Sandra's neighbors; incinerating more than 2,200 homes, including hers; and creating a lunarscape 20 times the size of Manhattan.

[The Fire Outside My Window](#) is a riveting and nuanced tale that captures the intensity of a runaway wildfire, honors those lost to its fury, and celebrates the human spirit's innate capacity to triumph over adversity. Buy your print or ebook copy [HERE](#).

If you'd like to learn more about resilience, positivity and post-traumatic growth . . .

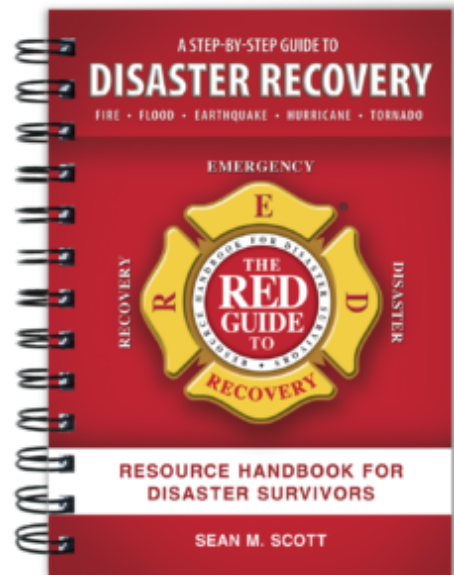
- ***Authentic Happiness***, Martin Seligman
- ***Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow***, Elizabeth Lesser
- ***Flourish***, Martin Seligman
- ***Gratitude Works: A 21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity***, Robert Emmons
- ***Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance***, Angela Duckworth
- ***How Did I Get Here? Finding Your Way to Renewed Hope and Happiness When Life and Love Take Unexpected Turns***, Barbara De Angelis
- ***Man's Search for Meaning***, Viktor Frankl
- ***Positivity***, Barbara Frederickson
- ***The How of Happiness***, Sonja Lyubomirsky

A guide to insurance and rebuilding

Coming back from crisis is a complex journey. The proven resilience-building practices summarized in The ComeBACK Formula™ help us heal our hearts and minds.

But for many disaster survivors, coming back also involves rebuilding a home or business—a major undertaking under the best of circumstances and all the more stressful when insurance claims affect the construction process.

Fortunately, my friend and colleague Sean Scott has developed a wonderful resource, **The Red Guide to Recovery**, to streamline this nuts and bolts aspect of the comeback journey.



A San Diego contractor with over 30 years of experience specializing in disaster restoration, Sean has helped thousands of clients repair and rebuild homes and businesses after fires, floods and storms. So he's seen firsthand how daunting it can be to sort out insurance, funding and construction challenges.

After devastating wildfires swept through Southern California in 2003 and 2007, destroying nearly 6,000 homes, Sean realized disaster survivors needed a roadmap to guide them through the recovery process.

His **Red Guide to Recovery** has since been adopted by fire departments, relief organizations, government agencies and communities across the United States. And Sean has become a leading voice in disaster preparation and recovery.

I'm delighted to partner with him in providing guidance for disaster survivors as they rebuild their homes and reclaim their lives. Together, **The Red Guide to Recovery** and **The ComeBACK Formula™** offer a comprehensive roadmap to steer you around pitfalls and keep you on track during the comeback journey.

Get your copy of **The Red Guide** and Sean's newest book, **Secrets of the Insurance Game**, at TheRedGuideToRecovery.com

Notes

ABOUT SANDRA

Sandra Younger is an international speaker, best-selling author and popular media guest whose inspiring wildfire-survival story and proven resilience-building practices equip disaster survivors, emergency professionals, and other mission-driven leaders to transform disaster into opportunity and loss into legacy.



Sandra lost her home, 12 neighbors and almost her own life in the 2003 Cedar Fire, one of the biggest and most destructive wildfires in California history. Her 2013 book about that historic event, [The Fire Outside My Window: A Survivor Tells the True Story of California's Epic Cedar Fire](#) has been praised by Amazon reviewers, hailed as required reading for residents of wildfire country, adopted as a training text for top-level emergency professionals, and featured on NBC's Dateline.

*Sandra's **ComeBACK Formula™ Guidebook** is a unique toolkit of powerful, commonsense practices proven to build personal resilience, the skill that helps speed and smooth long-term emotional recovery from challenging and catastrophic events.*

Have you or your community been rocked by crisis? Is your organization struggling to come back from a setback?

**Here's good news: It *is* possible to transform disaster into opportunity and even loss into legacy. Find out how. Book Sandra as a keynote speaker, workshop leader or media guest. Visit SandraYounger.com
Call 619.301.4701 or email sandra@sandrayounger.com**

“Everything can be taken from a man [or woman] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist, Holocaust survivor